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PIGEONS

RACING HOMER TOPICS

VOLUME II

RACING HOMER FACTS AND SECRETS

BY

LESLIE C. SWANSON

MOLINE, ILLINOIS

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PIGEONS

RACING HOMER TOPICS

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LESLIE C. SWANSON

Moline, Illinois

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I.—RECORD FLIGHTS AND HISTORICAL DATA—Pigeons in World War No. 2. Longest Racing Homer Flights. Speed records. Over-water flying. Radio waves and effect on pigeons. Oldest flying pigeon.

Chapter II.—LOFT CONSTRUCTION — Variety of types. How to construct a loft. Sizes. Nest box arrangements and sizes. Outside pen. Importance of good ventilation.

Chapter III.—BREEDING FUNDAMENTALS.—Acclimation of new stock. Long and short distance birds. Line breeding with reservations. Separation of the sexes. Weaning difficulties. The show pen.

Chapter IV.—TRAINING AND CONDITIONING.—Relative importance of stock and condition. Flying unmated birds. Training in same direction. Training of yearlings. Two nights in basket. Aids to fast clocking.

Chapter V.—THE MOULTING FACTOR.—A Critical time. Peak of condition. General rules for moulting period. Fret-marks, feather rot and split flights. Progress of the moult.

Chapter VI.—YOUNG BIRD RACING.—Most interesting phase of the sport. Minimum tosses. Variations in young birds. Flying mated youngsters. Mid-week tosses. Length of exercising periods. Breaking in the youngsters in the baskets.

Chapter VII.—FEEDING.—Elements of a winning diet. Importance of ingredients. Gradual changes in feed. How to feed mixtures. Feeding on Returns from Races. Tidbits. Importance of grit.

Chapter VIII.—DISEASE CONTROL AND TONICS.—Isolation of diseased birds. Skin eruptions. Use of sulphur and other tonics. Greasy wattles and eye colds. Control of lice and other parasites. Diarrhea.

Chapter IX.—GENERAL LOFT MANAGEMENT.—

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PIGEONS

Racing Homer Topics

CHAPTER I.

PIGEONS IN WORLD WAR NO. 2.—When war engulfed the world in 1939 racing pigeons and their fanciers were ready to serve their countries again as they had so nobly done in 1914-1918. Pigeon Services organized in Britain and the United States were given a vital assignment in helping to win the war by maintaining communications. The full story could not be told as the conflict raged, but racing pigeons made history again in World War No. 2. Vast changes were introduced in the manner of handling birds by Pigeon Service Companies of the U. S. Army which are almost certain to have a profound effect on civilian flying in post-war times. Such innovations as two-way flying and night-flying birds are expected to revolutionize certain phases of the sport. The full significance of the changes to be wrought upon the sport by the stress of war-time development and discoveries may not be realized for a number of years however.

Two-way flying was hailed as the greatest discovery in the history of the sport. Whereas birds in World War No. 1 could fly only one way, i. e. from the point of liberation back to their mobile lofts, pigeons in the second conflict were developed to carry messages back and forth from two points, a hitherto unheard of operation. How it was done was one of the best kept secrets of the war.

Pigeons have been put to many new uses in war-time operations. Greater use of airplanes brought increased need for pigeons which accompanied fliers on hazardous trips. On many occasions messages sent back by pigeons brought relief to fliers downed in the sea or in isolated sectors. Racing pigeons dropped in Occupied Europe were also used extensively to fly back information to Britain from partisans who had no other means of communication.

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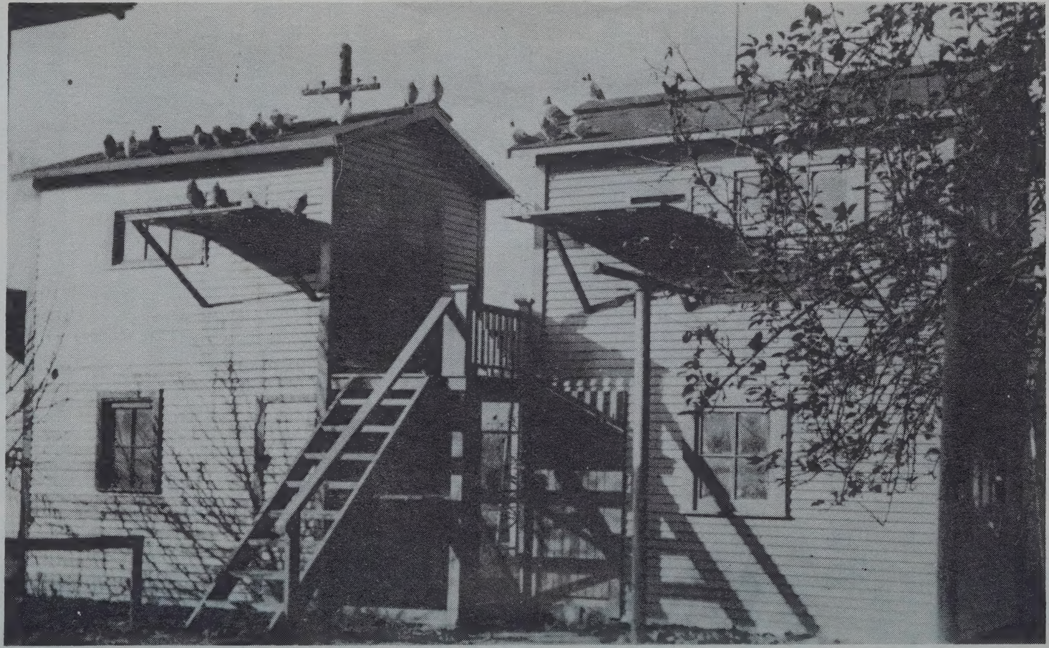

OLD AND YOUNG BIRD LOFTS AT HOME OF AUTHOR.

Homing pigeons were also put to a good use during World War No. 2 by the U. S. Navy, which credited the birds with helping to sink a number of submarines. Baskets of pigeons were carried aboard dirigibles and scouting planes patrolling coastal waters and were released with messages giving the location of submarines which were sighted. Bombers, summoned in this manner, sent a number of u-boats to the bottom. Pigeons were used instead of radio messages as the latter would be easily detected by the submarine.

Much credit for the success of pigeons in the war was due to the fanciers who gave their wholehearted support to the war effort. Beside supplying thousands of men from their ranks to organize pigeon companies, fanciers furnished a large number of birds to the armed services. Although the government offered to purchase such birds when the Pigeon Service was organized, the civilians in most cases showed their patriotism by donating some of their best birds.

Britain, during the darkest hours of the blitz in 1940 and 1941, had a vast network of pigeon communications ready to function in the event of an invasion, which never came. Disruption of wire service by bombing and shellfire and jamming of radio communications would have found pigeons ready to do the job of getting the important messages through.

LONGEST RACING HOMER FLIGHT.—The longest reported racing homer flight in history was by a bird which flew approximately 7,200 miles from Arras, France, to Saigon, Indo-China, across many seas, mountains and deserts in the remarkable time of 24 days. The bird was taken to France in a wicker basket, stowed far down in a ship's hold but promptly got its bearings and struck out eastward as soon as it was liberated. (The flight, though frequently mentioned in magazine articles, has never been fully verified.) The longest U. S. record was established by an army bird, which reached San Antonio, Texas, after a flight of 2,100 miles from Vanceboro, Maine. The longest American record was established by a pigeon which picked its way back to Brooklyn from Caracas, Venezuela, 2,200 miles away. The Venezuela flight undoubtedly covered more miles than those actually measured as the only fair way to determine the distance would be over a route through Central America up through Mexico. Flights of 1,000 to 1,200 miles are now common occurence in the United States and many clubs hold at least one marathon event over the 1,000-mile distance each year. Records of various clubs over the 1,000-mile event vary from a day and a half to two days. The distance negotiated by pigeons is slowly increasing and we now think of 1,000 miles as no greater test than 750 miles was two decades ago. "Five hundred miles in a day," is slowly giving way to the standard yardstick expression, "Six hundred miles in the day."

RECORD FLIGHTS—One of the longest club flights in America was staged in 1933 by the Oklahoma City Homing Pigeon club which liberated seventeen birds from five lofts at Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. Hudson Bay was then choked with ice and snow covered the ground at the liberation point to the depth of several inches. Twenty days later the winner arrived at the loft of Robert M. Hawkins after battling tornadoes, rain and winds throughout the 1,601-mile race. When the bird arrived the temperature registered 98 degrees. Other outstanding flights in past years include a Havanna-Baltimore flight of 1,100 miles, partly over water in four days and an 800-mile trip from Texas to Indiana in a little more than 24 hours. One of the most consistent of the long distance champions was a bird, "Long-Neck," owned by the late Clarence Van Damme of Rock Island, Ill. This bird won the 1,000-mile flight for three years in a row. He took fourth on his first 1,000-mile event from Colorado Springs in 1933, third in 1934, and established a record of two and one-half days from the same station in 1935. In 1936 he established a similar mark when the 1,000-mile starting point was shifted to Dalhart, Texas. In 1937, at the age of nine years, he again paced the field in three days despite unfavorable weather and wind conditions. In 10 years of races this bird covered almost 25,000 miles.

Another outstanding long distance flight accomplishment was recorded by a bird the writer sold to a fancier in Lynchburg, Va., in December, 1934. After 18 months of confinement this bird broke loose on May 28, 1936, and within 48 hours was discovered on the old home loft in Moline. In two days' time, this bird covered approximately 800 miles of entirely unfamiliar territory and its feat is all the more remarkable when it is noted that the flight was performed with no previous opportunities for exercising except in the narrow confines of the prisoners' pen.

SPEED RECORDS—Many speed records have been brought to the attention of the writer in the past two score years, but the most outstanding ones are marks compiled by pigeons in England in 1939 on a 600-mile race and by young birds in the United States on a 507-mile flight the same year.

The phenomenal speed of 1,875 yards a minute was compiled on the 600-mile race by a pigeon owned by Jepson Bros. and Curtis of Peterboro, England, who clocked their bird at 1:30 o'clock in the afternoon, hours before pigeons are normally expected on such a flight. Good time was made by other entries the same day and almost 50 per cent reached home the day of toss.

Another sensational speed record was made shortly later by two young pigeons owned by A. J. De Pourcq of Milledgeville, Ga., on a race from Terre Haute, Ind. Released at 7:20 a. m., the two pigeons arrived together at 4:47 p. m. for an average speed of 1,573.92 yards a minute. The second loft to report a bird on this race did not receive a return until the next day.

One of the best middle distance speed marks in recent years was recorded in 1936 by an East Moline, Ill., pigeon which covered the 256-mile event with an average speed of 2,104.32 yards per minute.

OVER-WATER FLYING—Ordinarily speaking, it is not advisable to expect a racing homer to fly over more than 200 miles of open water although there are instances where they have covered as much as 300 miles and possibly more. It is recorded in history that the French navy once established pigeon cotes on all its warships but that they were abandoned when it was found that the birds would not reliably return at distances over 200 miles. An experimental flight held in the summer of 1937 from Arendal, Norway, by English and Scottish fanciers also bears out these statements. Two hundred homers were shipped to the Norway point and released at 5 o'clock in the morning on a flight which would require 400 miles of over-water flying across the North Sea between the southern extremity of the Scandinavian Peninsula and Scotland. Needless to say, none of the birds reached home the same day and indications are that any of them which attempted the flight straight across the sea perished by nightfall. Some of the more-experienced birds, however, seemed to sense the futility of the over-water attempt and followed the longest course around by way of Denmark, Holland and Belgium. The first arrival was clocked 12 days later by John Banks of Folkestone, England, and the second prize winner was reported the following day. Another bird on the flight wandered into France, where it was reported as a visitor on a loft. In staging the flight English fanciers recalled a similar long distance test from Rome to England many years before when the first arrival required exactly one month to get home. The second and only other pigeon ever to reach England finished the next week, while the remainder of the entry list apparently fell prey to hawks in the Alps.

GREATEST DISASTERS—What is regarded as the greatest racing homer disasters ("smash" in the parlance of the racing homer fancy) of all time occurred in September, 1938, when more than 4,000 pigeons were lost on a single race held from Rennes, Frances to Scotland. The group of 4,650 young birds was liberated at Rennes in fair weather conditions but storms developed shortly later and only 100 pigeons returned the first week. Very few of the lot were seen since, making the total loss, approximately 95 per cent of the entry list. Rivaling this disaster was another which occurred in September, 1937, when 3,000 birds were lost of a 3,445 entry on a race from Guernsey to Worcester, England. The birds were liberated in the teeth of a terrific wind after held over for several days on account of unfavorable weather conditions. Only seven birds homed the same day. On another race in 1936 from Berlin to England 3,000 old birds were wiped out as an unseasonal heavy fog prevailed for several days.

RADIO WAVES AND RACING HOMERS—The possible effect of radio waves on the pigeon's homing instinct has been discussed at great length in recent magazine articles and considerable difference of opinion has been found to exist on the subject. Exhausting tests have been made and will be continued in the hopes of settling this question. However, in a recent survey the writer found the majority of racing homer fanciers are inclined to support the theory that radio waves have exerted some influence over their birds. As far as the general fancy is concerned the principal observation is that heavy losses of pigeons have occurred over the last decade or more while radio stations were simultaneously becoming more numerous and were gaining authority to use more and more power. Many fanciers recognized a co-relation between the two but some of us will remain open-minded until some more definite data is obtained. The fact remains that in spite of tremendous losses of young birds in recent years thousands of pigeons fly home regularly, undisturbed by this radio phenomena, if we are to assume it exists, at all. On some of the worst races where as high as 70 to 80 per cent of the entry list was lost, it was found that the first returns were made in good time and in some instances even records were established. If radio does interfere, then the racing homer of the future can be bred along "radio-resistance" lines, i. e., from those birds whose homing instincts do not seem to be impaired by this aerial disturbance.

Gradually increasing young bird losses were noticed throughout the world during the decade of 1920 to 1930, the same years in which radio attained rapid development, if that observation is worthy of being mentioned. More losses occurred in 1931, 1932 and 1933 and the "smashes" reached their height in 1934 to 1936. The radio controversy among fanciers became hotter during those years but a ray of hope was noted in the period from 1937 to 1943 in which years losses were somewhat reduced in all but a few centers.

OLDEST FLYING PIGEON—Although most pigeons have passed their peak at seven years old and practically all are retired by the time they are 10 years old, a Moline, Ill., pigeon, "Old Gray One," owned by Nick Van Doornevelt, is believed to have set a record when it covered the 500-mile and 1,000-mile events at the ripe old age of 15 in 1943.

"Old Gray One's" amazing record was the subject of several magazine articles late in 1943 after he had flown into a money position on the 500-mile race and was clocked the same day the prizes expired on the 1,000-mile event.

For 14 straight years from 1930 to 1943 "Old Gray One" finished in the money and for 12 straight years from 1930 to 1941 never finished lower than fifth. Other winnings of this remarkable bird included a first on the 800-mile race in 1937 and first on the 400-mile distance in 1935 and 1937 as well as other second and third diplomas at various distances. Many descendants of this bird have also ranked high over the longer distances.

CHAPTER II

LOFT CONSTRUCTION

VARIETY OF TYPES—The homing pigeon will race to any kind of a home no matter how humble it will be. It may be only a piano box, converted into a loft, or it may be an elaborately laid out loft whose cost may run into the hundreds and even thousands of dollars. There are scores of types of racing pigeon lofts, ranging from one or two-story backyard lofts to cotes which are constructed in the upper stories of garages or the attic of homes such as a common practice in Belgium.

UP TO FANCIER—The type of racing pigeon loft to be selected by the fancier depends entirely upon facilities and space at his home, the number of birds he intends to keep and his financial resources. Those who are venturing into the sport for the first time might be wise to start on a limited scale before investing heavily in buildings and equipment. Many fanciers start out by "feeling their

662147

way along" to determine whether they intend to stick to their hobby. In many cases it is possible for them to build a small loft into the upper part of their garage or barn. This practice requires a minimum of lumber and labor and will provide a fairly comfortable place for the birds. If constructed at one end of the garage the fancier merely has to build a floor and close up the open side and he has his loft completed with the exception of the nest box work inside the enclosure. The door may be cut into the loft from either the outside or inside the building and a small exit hole for the pigeons may be placed well under the eaves of the building proper or they may be cut into the sloping roof itself, with adequate covering provided to keep rain from entering.

LARGER TYPES—Two story lofts such as the twin lofts of the author shown in this book are a common type of construction found in the middle west. One such loft, providing accommodations for birds upstairs and downstairs, may be erected at a cost of $100 to $300, depending of course on present lumber prices, whether old or new lumber is used, and whether a carpenter is hired to do the work or the fancier is capable of doing the job himself. The two-story loft is an ideal arrangement if you want to keep some prisoners as well as your racing team.

The ground floor can be turned over to the prisoners and an outside flying pen can be arranged either in front, back or side of the loft. The upstairs naturally lends itself more usable to birds which are flying out and should be reached by steps and a door at one side where a fancier should erect an observation platform running the full width of the loft. Such a platform gives the fancier a good lookout post on race day and much time in trapping can be saved by this arrangement.

If a fancier does not keep prisoners the first floor can be fully utilized by allowing the entire flock the run of the whole loft. This can be accomplished by cutting a hole in the upstairs floor, about 8x16 inches, at one end of the loft (preferably at the side opposite from the doorway) and extending a small platform downward at an angle of about 45 degrees. Some fanciers have this platform built on hinges and close it up at times to divide males and hens segregated in the upstairs and downstairs sections.

ONE-STORY LOFTS—One-story lofts, built from six inches to two feet above the ground on piers or cement blocks are also popular in many sections of the world. Again the size of such buildings is up to the fancier and the space and size of his pocketbook. A popular size is a loft 6 to 8 feet wide, 10 or 12 feet long and from 6 to 8 feet high. The type of roof may be peaked or sloping, in only one direction.

NEST BOXES—Nest boxes, like the lofts themselves, present a wide variety of types. Sizes vary from a box about the dimensions of one side of an orange crate to nest boxes about 25x25x25 inches and even larger. Nest boxes on my two lofts are practically all 24x20x20. Nest boxes are best arranged in rows placed parallel along the walls of the long sides of the loft. A door at one end of the loft gives easy access to the interior and permits the fancier to remain on the platform or step outside his loft and still have a full view of the entire interior.

If a fancier prefers the door may be placed at either the front or back although I believe the opening on the side has more advantages. Although there are no hard and fast rules on exactly how wide the interior should be, the fancier should guard against having to much open space, a condition which makes for wildness of the birds. It is easier to exercise control over the flock and minimize wildness if the space between the nest boxes on the two sides of the loft measures between three and a half to four feet. Birds are much easier to pick up in such quarters as they feel a sense of frustration and will more readily submit to handling without attempting to escape when they realize the fancier has such control of the situation.

While the arrangement of the loft goes a long way toward giving the fancier the upper hand at all times, tameness of birds can be further accomplished by other measures. 1) Take each bird into your hand once or twice a day or at least two or three times a week at regular intervals. Pick it up carefully and after holding it a few seconds rest it down just as gently. This practice will work wonders in building up the bird's confidence in you. 2) In the off-season cut down on the daily feed allotments and perhaps skip a meal entirely now and then until the birds appear willing to accept food directly from your hand. Some of them will be slow to do this but patience and persistence will enable you to win over the most stubborn of birds.

OUTSIDE PEN—While an outside pen is an absolute necessity for birds in the prisoner's compartment, a similar cage may also be attached to the loft of birds which are permitted to exercise regularly in the morning and evening. This type of pen need not be large and can be built on the roof, high on the side of the loft or extending from one or two walls over the ground. Such a cage will give the birds a chance to bathe in the sun's rays if they desire and escape the oppressive heat inside the loft some times when the temperature soars over the 100 degree mark. If the cage can be constructed of sufficient size, it is wise to provide a shade over part of the structure under which the birds will seek protection when the sun's rays are too intense. Such pens are often found attached to young bird lofts of successful fanciers who provide this arrangement to aid the development of the growing pigeons.

ALUMINUM BOBS PREFERRED — Aluminum bobs are far more desirable than home-made wire contraptions. The aluminum bobs obtainable at any of the pigeon supply houses at a nominal sum, present less weight resistance to a tired pigeon back from a hard race, and many valuable seconds will be saved in clocking. The heavier wire traps cause the birds to exert more energy in pushing them forward and a tired and nervous trapping pigeon may make several false starts and poise half way through the bobs to think the situation over before he finally thrusts himself through. In connection with an efficient trap, I also recommend the cutting of a small separate exit beside the main opening, two or three inches to either side, via which the birds may be released for exercising. By using the extra exit it will be unnecessary to hoist and fasten any of the bobs of the main trap and the birds will get accustomed to trapping more readily. If one of the main bobs is raised and fastened to permit the birds to leave and enter, they will go in and out of the opening without pushing the bobs, a situation they would not encounter on race day, when the traps would all be down. In other words the traps should look the same on race day as it does through the week. As to the small exit, birds could be prevented from going back into the loft by suspending one or two out-swinging bobs. A small door over the exit can be placed on the inside of the loft to regulate free trap or confinement, as the case may be.

IMPORTANCE OF GOOD VENTILATION — Many fanciers, in constructing their loft, are prone to overlook the all important matter of ventilation. To them the expression, "well-ventilated," is a by-word for the novice which they accept as a matter of course or ignore as something with an empty meaning. They accordingly build almost airtight lofts and seal them up like a tomb at the first sign of cold weather. Birds do not need this kind of protection against the cold. They are capable of withstanding great extremes in temperature if given plenty of good sound dry corn and proper ventilation. Almost any type of ventilator will do, whether the overhead type in the ceiling or one on the wall. Care should be taken, however, that a draft will not be created. If you are in doubt how to install the proper ventilator, consult a carpenter or some one familiar with such details who can make recommendations to suit your particular loft. The matter of good ventilation cannot be over-emphasized. A loft, suffering from poor circulation of air, will be inclined to be damp, emit a dank and obnoxious odor, and slow to dry out after a protracted rainy weather period. Such conditions are conducive to sore eyes, loose bowels and other ailments which reach epidemic proportions in many cases before the fanciers realize where the trouble is. I have witnessed many cases of such diseases thriving in damp and poorly-ventilated lofts where the trouble was cleared up almost over night by remedial measures as described above. Nature will right the difficulty, once the underlying cause is removed.

HEATED LOFTS—Heated lofts are absolutely taboo. The birds would no doubt be more comfortable if artificial heat is provided but if you want strong, hardy birds they cannot be tampered with in this manner. In an experiment performed over a period of years it was found that pigeons on a heated loft suffered a gradual deterioration of feather structure while those on a loft in which the windows were left party open throughout the winter were found to develop an unusually heavy protective coating of feathers. Needless to say, you will probably find the best racing pigeons are very well feathered.

CHAPTER III

BREEDING FUNDAMENTALS

ACCLIMATION OF NEW STOCK—Acclimation is a factor to be reckoned with when birds are brought from one continent to another or in some cases from one section of the country to another. Birds reared and flown in a southern climate will often fare poorly when transferred to a northern area and vice versa and the stock will not show its true worth until the second and third generations of the imported breeders. This observation is also the rule rather than the exception with birds which have been imported into Illinois from Belgium, the stock usually coming into its own with second and subsequent generations. Similar sectional complications result in transfers from various parts of the United States to other sections. The stock, most capable of adjusting itself in any kind of weather conditions, appears to be that which has come from an area where there are wide variations in temperature and weather conditions. Here in the Mississippi Valley the temperature has ranged as much as 130 degrees in one year, from 110 above to 20 below. The birds here become accustomed to all sorts of conditions over a trying course and in recent years stock I have supplied has held its own in the dust storms of Kansas, the Pacific Coast, Canada, Louisiana, in the south and eastern states.

LONG AND SHORT DISTANCE BIRDS—It is up to each individual fancier to learn the distance at which his various birds perform the best and attempt to get the most out of them by having them in the best possible condition when their time comes. Certain blood lines will be found which will excell at the shorter sprints from 50 to 200 miles while others will not start to finish with the leaders until the 200-mile station is passed. Other strains will slump badly in the young bird races but come into their own at the yearling or two-year-old stage. Therefore, it can be seen that it is no easy task to attempt to blend long and short distance strains, to develop all-around birds. Occasionally, and the percentage is very low, such pigeons are produced but even so their physical powers have their limitations and too many races in one season will only "burn them out." Differences as to physical type of short and long distance racing homers also make it strongly advisable to avoid attempts to cross them. Mixing of strains, unless performed scientificially and with some definite goal in view, will often get the fancier into difficulties. Some strains will blend with others but again if the breeder is not careful to bring together male and female of like type a queer combination of an offspring may result. Great physical disparities between the couple should be avoided in breeding and this is a danger which stalks indiscriminate strain-mixing. Much depends, however, on the individuals' ability or luck to strike good combinations when they attempt breeding in a blind manner or hit-or-miss style. Remember that all champions are not bred directly by actual champions. It is important that a bird's background include good prize-winning stock but the parents may be stock birds which are kept on the loft for breeding purposes only and are rarely flown except on short tosses to keep their homing instincts sharpened.

GETTING MORE OUT OF THE BREEDERS—If you have a male or a hen or a particular pair of birds which are valued highly for exceptional records in producing good youngsters, they can be put to work under a schedule best calculated to get the most number of eggs from them in one season. Males, especially can be worked harder as they do not undergo the egg-laying strain which naturally curtails the hens, and it is possible to keep rotating them among three or even four mates, removing the eggs to other sitting birds and shifting him to the box of another hen. More youngsters may be obtained from a hen by removing her eggs after allowing her to sit on them a few days. Caution must be exercised, however, with the latter method and if the hen is being used as a racer it should not be tried at all.

BREEDING TRUE TO COLOR—Racing homers, usually breed true to color unless there has been cross-breeding among the stock several generations back. The reappearance of a color which predominated in predecessors is often referred to by fanciers as "old blood showing up." These birds are particularly normal in all respects and many of them will develop into good racers if their background is favorable. Color has absolutely no effect on a pigeon's homing ability, although many fanciers through personal whims attempt to keep the birds paired as closely as possible to color.

LINE BREEDING WITH RESERVATIONS—Fanciers, who do not have an unlimited number of birds or who do not attempt to practice line-breeding, will eventually encounter the problem of too much in-breeding. Within a few years they are at their wits end trying to schedule pairing without running the risk of being too much the same blood. Under such circumstances a fancier may turn to line-breeding on a small scale, mating some of his most valued racers or breeders with a son or daughter, as the case may be. I know of many fanciers who resort to this method when they are pressed for breeding combinations, although they make no further attempt at line-breeding and are not interested in the subject.

HOW SEXES SHOULD BE SEPARATED—Individual lofts prove more convenient for separation of the sexes in the late fall and winter months but where space limitations do not permit the construction of another building, any average-sized loft, may be partitioned off to provide separate quarters. Lath, wire, or lattice-work partitions are of little value as such barriers do not screen the males and females from the sight of each other. The males will dance about in front of their old mates on the opposite side of such barriers and will expend a lot of energy needlessly. The off-season is the time of the year when the birds need a thorough rest. It will be much easier to pair up the birds in the spring if they are kept out of sight of their old mates for a few months.

Oddly enough, the hens seem to resent the separation more than the males. After two or three weeks of the separation they appear to get restless by their solitude and will often pair up, one hen masquerading as the male. They will even nest and either or both might lay eggs. Under such circumstances they should be allowed to sit on the eggs until they tire of it. During this time the hens should be watched for tendencies to wander away from home. Occasionally, some of them will quit their original home entirely, renouncing the instinct of their kind, to settle on an entirely strange loft. Rather than risk losing them under such circumstances it is better to keep them penned up or allow them to return with their old mates for a few days, removing them before they start building a nest again.

DATE FOR SEPARATION OF SEXES—There is no definite date at which it is decreed the fancier "must" separate the males and sexes and it is largely a matter of the individual's judgment. Some fanciers go to extremes in putting their birds apart, segregating them as soon as they complete the breeding and flying season in late summer. Personally, I don't think it makes a great deal of difference whether it is any date in September, October or November. The birds do very little breeding in the late months although they will occasionally prove troublesome and attempt to get to nest during unseasonal periods of extremely warm weather in the fall. They should then be discouraged from nesting and egg-laying by immediately separating them for a few days until cooler weather returns and their love of mating cools. A flock handled in this manner will pass through the moulting period just as well as birds which are divided since August. For all practical purposes any date from Nov. 1 to Dec. 1, will suffice. Separation of the birds entails a certain amount of extra work and there is no need to carry the program to extremes. If your loft facilities do not permit separation of your birds, don't worry about it. It is a controversial subject and a minority of fanciers can achieve successful results without it.

SAVE THE YOUNGSTERS—If the rapidly growing youngsters slip out of the nests and make their way to the floor where they will fall prey to bloodthirsty males, board up the bottom row of nests around the loft, leaving a space of about two and a half inches above the floor. When the youngsters are pursued by the males they will crawl through the opening which will be small enough to prevent their assailants from reaching them. Some males are perfect demons at attacking helpless youngsters and they are easily detected through traces of blood on their beaks. You will usually find that there are only one or two offenders in this respect in every loft.

WEANING DIFFICULTIES—A critical time arrives in the squeakers' development when the parents, occupied by a freshly-hatched pair of eggs, abandon them to the ways of the world and to take care of themselves. Frequently they show little aptitude in learning the art of picking up grain and gradually lose weight and vitality, becoming susceptible to any number of diseases. The fancier should be on the alert at this time to tide the youngster over this period by resorting to artificial feeding. Peas or corn may be administered by opening the bird's beak and allowing the feed to drop down the bird's throat, one at a time. When the throat starts to clog from the grain, thrust the bird's beak into the water fountain. If it still refuses to drink, give it some water through a medicine dropper or small syringe.

INCREASING YOUNGSTERS' SIZE—If youngsters from certain pairs appear to lack complete development owing to feeding deficiency by the parents during their third and fourth week of growth, they may be artificially fed in the manner described in the preceding paragraph. Feed the youngsters, which have been shorted by the parents, after the old birds have completed their regular feeding. Young birds can be developed to enormous size under this plan and caution must be exercised so it won't be overdone.

THE HOMER FOR THE SHOW PIGEON—Wide differences may frequently be noted in the opinion of judges on what they consider the most perfect type of racing pigeon but for all general purposes the following descriptions will fit the highest percentage of winners in the show pen. Readers who are desirous of entering birds in the shows should attempt to make their selections conform as far as possible to the standard given below.

Point for point I consider the perfect pigeon for the show pen as having the following characteristics:

General Condition —Above all the judge likes a bird which handles well, which seems to fit right into the hand and give a good impression at the outset. The bird should be neither too fat or too thin; flesh fairly firm; generally well braced; plenty of sheen on the feathers.

Keels—The keel should be of medium depth and length, slightly curved toward the front and as straight as a keel of the ship. Birds with extremely long, deep or crooked keels are of no value in the show pen.

Eye cere—The eye cere should be of average texture and size, neither over-emphasized or noticably lacking.

The general color may be either dark-colored or cream shade. Birds with a pinkish tint on the eye cere seldom get a second look from the scrutinizing judges.

Eyes—Darker-shaded eyes are given the preference by most judges. The bright red colored eyes or nut brown eyes are the most fascinating while pearl-eyed birds find fanciers and judges strongly prejudiced against them.

Neck—The neck should be fairly thick-set and short, tapering off into a beautiful curve into the under part of the body and back.

Wattles—The age of the bird should be reckoned with in observing the size of the wattles. Over-development of wattles in young males often brings disqualification. Wattles should be governed by the same rules as noted above under the heading of eye cere.

Vent bones—Vent bones should be fairly close in the males and slightly apart in the females. They should possess plenty of rigidity. If they can be pushed in all directions, a weakness in the bird is promptly checked by the judge.

Wings—When wings are not extended there should be no openings appear between the secondary feathers. The wing flights should be strong and well-developed and line up in fairly straight line when the wing is held straight out from the body. They should be of ample thickness to form a well-knit pattern when the wings are outstretched. Feather faults, wing frets or broken flights automatically disqualify all entrants.

The Tail—The tail feathers should be developed in proportion to the bird's general feather condition and size of its body. The tail feathers should be well arranged and not loosely spread.

HARD-DRIVING MALES AND THIN-SHELLED EGGS—If a male is of the hard-driving type and starts chasing his hen three or four days in advance of laying without giving her any rest or a chance to eat or drink, look out for thin-shelled eggs. It is often advisable to lock up the offending males a few hours each day during the critical period before the laying to give the hen a much-needed opportunity to pick up grit and minerals.

CHAPTER IV

TRAINING AND CONDITIONING

RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF STOCK AND CONDITION—The question is often raised as to the relative importance of stock and the condition of the bird in winning races. Both of these items are of supreme importance but in my opinion there are four main factors in all governing the ultimate success or failure of the bird, namely, (1) condition of the bird, (2) stock, (3) training or experience of the bird, and (4) the fancier himself, or his skill in handling birds and being able to get the most possible out of them. These four items are segregated in their importance as follows: Condition, 50 per cent; stock, 25 per cent; training, 12½ per cent, and the fancier, 12½ per cent. There is a certain amount of over-lapping between Nos. 1 and 4 as the condition of the bird is usually subject to the fancier's care and knowledge of rounding his pigeons into shape.

HEALTH AND CONDITION—There is an old adage, "All that glitters is not gold." Likewise we must note that the racing homer with dazzling beauty, beautiful sheen, firm wattles and eye cere, etc., the picture of health, is not necessarily one which can be considered as being in condition for racing. In other words, health and condition cannot be used synonymously. Condition is not possible without health but health is, possible without racing condition. Many lofts are suffering from this trouble, and lack of condition is difficult to understand for the novice when his birds appear to be in good shape. The bird is considered in good form for racing when it is not carrying an ounce of excess fat or flesh; its eyes seem to radiate superb condition; its feathers firm and skin-tight and its body well developed and hardened by regular exercise. Watch for the red bubble on the keel bone and a sharp red color in the legs and feet. The bird's general activity likewise bespeaks its condition. Males which bounce about the loft, chasing the hens and challenging every male in sight, cannot be in any state but good condition. Their every move when exercising outside the loft will also give strong indications of its endurance, pep and wind. A further sign of extreme fitness is trembling wing tips or half-raised wings before the exercising period.

FLYING UNMATED BIRDS—Old birds which are not mated for one cause or another are better left at home and entirely removed from the loft of your racing team. Whether males or females, they are constant trouble-makers among the pigeon families. Attempts to race them seldom are marked with success although they will occasionally show flashes of form. Birds whose mates have disappeared on races or which have been removed from the loft, however, will often make surprising early returns but as general rule they are nothing more than "long shots." Unmated birds lack the instinct to return home to the call of mate and young, their only incentive being food and shelter. Yearling males have been found to turn in the best performances in the unmated state but the results with them except in a small percentage of attempts has been generally unsatisfactory.

TRAINING IN SAME DIRECTION—For all practical purposes, keep your birds on the same general direction. All clubs usually follow one line in their flights so the birds might as well get accustomed from the outset that they will always fly north, south, southwest, northeast, etc., as the case may be. There are some good points to a training program under which the youngsters would be taken in different direction during the early stages but the average fancier hardly has enough time to get his birds thoroughly **trained in along** one-air-line, much less two, or three more. Birds, once **trained in one direction,** however, should be able to come back home from any point of the compass at a reasonable distance. Recently two of my former birds came back to my lofts from Erie, Pa., and Buffalo, N. Y., after a year's confinement by their new owners, despite the fact that I had flown both of them for two years from only Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas and Colorado points, always in a westerly or southwesterly or entirely opposite direction from that which they were forced to chart in their surprising flights from the east. If birds are being trained for newspaper or army purposes, however, it is a different matter. In that work, the racing homer is called upon to regularly fly from widely scattered points, so it is necessary for their handlers to give them workouts from all directions.

UTILIZING JEALOUSY INSTINCT—Inevitable losses of a male or female from one pair or another during the old bird racing season may often prove a blessing in disguise. Birds, which have just lost their mate, will often attempt to infringe on another's mate and a desperate rivalry will be set up which may extend for days. Whenever such a situation develops in my own loft, I look for some good returns by the birds whose mates have been the object of the rival's flirtations. Hens are usually the worst offenders in the attempts to steal others' mates and are found to react more often to these conditions.

ALTERNATING OLD BIRDS ON RACES—Some of the most successful old bird racers conserve the strength of their birds by allowing them to fly on alternate weeks, especially over the middle distance races which are flown every Saturday or Sunday in most centers until the 500 and 600-mile events. This plan of keeping them home every other week by dividing the old bird racing team is a safeguard against wholesale losses on "smash" days as well as the other advantages which can be noted. For instance, in a club which flies a schedule of races at 60, 90, 135, 180, 230, 300, 400, 500, and 600, a fancier could designate certain birds for the 60-135-230-400 and 500 or 600 mile events while planning the remainder for the other events. After a pigeon has two years' experience of young bird and yearling competition behind it, the amount of distance increase between flights is of little consequence.

EXERCISING DURING WINTER MONTHS—Assuming that most of the discriminating fanciers keep their males and females separated during the winter months, I suggest that the birds be allowed their freedom under such a routine as males one day and hens the next or males in the morning and hens in the evening. During periods of extreme cold weather, rain or blizzards, nothing is to be gained by leaving the birds exposed to the elements, and they are far better off sitting on their perches in the loft. The flock will show a strong disinclination to taking exercise with the temperature hovering around or below the zero mark, and forcing them to fly in such conditions is nothing less than cruelty. During occasional periods of warmer days during the winter, the fancier should take advantage of all possible time for getting his birds outside. Keep the roofs of the loft free from heavy snowfalls after each storm if possible. This will prevent the birds from wallowing about in several inches of snow when they alight. Conditioning of the birds must be practiced 12 months of the year but you have to watch your opportunity and pick your days during the winter.

TRAINING OF YEARLINGS—It is not absolutely necessary to subject yearlings to the same routine of thorough training which they were given as youngsters but you ought to at least get them started fairly near home in the spring and give them several short training tosses at distances from 5 to 10 or 15 miles. This training will serve to refresh their experiences from the previous young bird racing season. Many fanciers have the mistaken notion that a pigeon once trained in as a youngster under such a careful routine as 1, 2, 4, 10, etc., miles may be jumped out to any distance from 20 to 40 miles when the training season starts the following spring. Of course they will come home but if you have the time you might as well practice thoroughness in your methods. Nothing will beat systematic efforts and clock-like precision.

FLYING BOTH BIRDS OF PAIR—Attempts to fly both male and female of the same pair will only lead the fancier into difficulties. Except on some of the shorter sprints from 50 to 200 miles, when the birds are away from the nest for a comparatively short time, it is generally advisable to fly only one bird of each pair. When the longer races are reached in June and July the birds would be required to be in the baskets two nights and three or more nights in case bad weather delays the liberation. Considerable switching of eggs or youngsters to nest of stay-at-home pairs would be entailed and the situation proves troublesome in general. Fanciers are advised to make up their minds as early as possible in the year on which individual bird of each pair they intend to concentrate their training and which bird stays home to take care of the nest.

LENGTH OF CONFINEMENT—Generally speaking it is a wise policy to give birds their freedom after one full year's confinement in the prisoner's pen. It has been the writer's experience as well as the conclusion of other fanciers that the second year's youngsters of birds continuously confined will not measure up to the first year's offspring. Apparently the homing instinct is dulled by more than one year's imprisonment and the old birds cannot help but deteriorate somewhat when their natural tendencies to use their wings are constantly held in restraint.

MISTAKES—Don't condemn a previously good racing homer when it makes mistakes now and then. If the good bird gets too far behind, finishing a half day late or stays out one or two days longer, it usually is a case of a mistake in judgment, overshooting the mark, or being blown off the course many miles to either side of the line to the home loft by strong winds. Allow the bird to rest and then send it out again. Birds, which occasionally make mistakes are also not to be condemned as breeders. The best of the racers will hit an "off" day occasionally. I would much rather stake my chances with a bird which occasionally errs rather than with one which may be inclined to lag behind a few minutes for no apparent causes on some races. I remember one of my best middle distance birds of several years ago which was one of the best examples of this statement. He was either in the clock with the front line birds or you would not see him at all until the next day sometimes. Good birds, which commit such mistakes, show that they are trying to reach home in fast time and no doubt they travel hundreds of miles past their mark before they realize their position. Such occurrences, it is noted, are more common on tail-wind races than in unfavorable weather. High wind and excessive speed throw the birds off stride and although the first arriving birds may approach record marks, heavy losses often accompany such racing days. "Blow-homes" are not a test of a bird's true abilities and neither are "smashes" when the weakest bird in the basket may squeeze through.

TWO NIGHTS IN THE BASKET—The question is often raised whether it is detrimental to the birds to keep them in baskets two or more nights through a series of races and whether 48 hours or more confinement in such quarters has a tendency to cut down their speed. In my opinion it is not detrimental in the least to keep the birds in the baskets as much as three days or possibly four if the baskets are provided with clean shavings or sawdust, if water containers are attached on the baskets and feeding accomodations are provided. Two days in the basket certainly do not have a tendency to cut down on their speed and I would say on the other hand that in the cases of most birds, two nights away from their home, is a big help in arousing an incentive to get back to the loft. I know many fanciers who are never able to accomplish much in the way of prize money until the distance of the flights gets to great that the birds are forced to be away from the loft for two days. For this same reason some of the most successful fanciers, often remove the birds from the loft on Friday nights on shorter races, even when the club does not ship them out until the preceding night. Thus you can see that two nights in the basket will, if anything speed up the birds.

AIDS TO FAST CLOCKING—One of the greatest aids in fast trapping, especially on the shorter races, is a two or three-inch pipe through which the man detaching the counter-marks may drop them to his assistant downstairs who is standing ready beside the clock. This arrangement is suitable only for two-story buildings, lofts over garages, etc. The pipe is cut through the floor protruding about three feet above the floor of the loft and located at a convenient spot, preferably alongside the inside platform. On some of the shorter young bird races, in which the prize winners are determined solely by the fastest clocker the advantage of such an arrangement is quite clear. Many times the first 30 to 100 birds will be closely bunched and as high as three to six birds may drop on one loft at the same time. With two men working the timing of the returns the handler of the birds will be free to catch them without loss of time in reaching for capsules and placing them in the clock. From 10 to 20 seconds can be saved by this arrangement.

As a further aid to fast trapping it is advisable to keep the stay-at-home birds hungry on race days. When arriving pigeons hit the loft roof or the trap platform, their nervousness is considerably relieved if they can hear the machine-gun-like staccato sound of birds on the inside running about and picking up the feed. Throw in the heavier feed such as corn, peas, etc., as it makes more noise rebounding from the floor and sides. The returning pigeons like to hear signs of activity about the loft and the sound of birds feeding in the interior will help to make conditions look as natural as possible. Caution curious spectators of the neighborhood to remain as far back from the loft as possible. The tempermental homing pigeons do like an audience and they will immediately sense something out of the ordinary if a crowd is around to watch the show.

If the interior of your loft arrangement permits, make a habit of keeping the drinking fountain within sight of the birds on the outside platform. Thirst and a glimpse of the water jug may coax many a stubborn trapping pigeon into the loft when all other means of persuasion seem to fail.

CHAPTER V

THE MOULTING FACTOR

A CRITICAL TIME—The moulting period is the most critical time in the racing homer's life from one year to the next but yet most of the lofts receive less attention then than they do at other times of the year. Coming as it does just after the conclusion of the old bird racing series in late summer, the period finds a natural let-down on the part of the fancier, who is inclined to become lax in his care of the birds after the strenuous racing season and the heavy breeding months. Fanciers should bear in mind that next year's champions are being made or last year's winners may become unfit for further winnings during the moulting period.

PEAK OF CONDITION—The racing homer should be at the peak of its condition for about a month to six weeks after it has dropped its first few wing flights. Most birds drop their first wing flight shortly after their first eggs of the year hatch. Fanciers, whose birds excell at the longer races are well aware of this factor, and this explains why many of them defer the breeding as long as possible to keep the birds' flights in good shape for the late season races. Pigeons which have been allowed to mate early in the year in the fancier's anxiety to get some youngsters ahead of his fellow club members will usually "fall apart" badly in feather structure with alarming swiftness in the middle of the long distance racing months. Once the heavy moult starts, it is a waste of money to send such birds away to the races and the fancier faces the added threat of his losing valuable birds, which are attempting to reach home in a greatly weakened condition.

LOWEST POINT IN BIRD'S CONDITION—The lowest point in the average bird's condition, barring unusual factors, is during the time when it is dropping its last two-wing flights and growing the new. During this time the bird is subject to various diseases, owing to its weakened vitality and must be watched closely for symptoms of trouble. This is one of the reasons why I urge the readers to avoid rearing of late-breds, where little is to be gained and an unnecessary load is thrown upon the breeding stock at a most inopportune time.

PREMATURE MOULTING—In addition to the factor of too early breeding, premature moulting or a too rapid moult are often caused by excessive feeding of rich grains or lack of exercise.

GENERAL RULES FOR THE MOULTING PERIOD—During the moulting season increase the amount of flax seed and hemp fed by several per cent and continue to do so throughout the period.

Plenty of grit should be kept before the birds constantly, but placed in a container which will prevent them from soiling it.

Scatter some loose sand and wood ashes about the floor occasionally, throwing in a fresh supply after the loft has been cleaned.

Allow the birds open trap throughout the day. If birds are separated as to sexes during the period, allow males freedom for a full day or half day, alternating with the hens.

Forced exercising is absolutely taboo during the moult. The flock will do very little flying at this time but do not take alarm at this apparent lack of activity. They will resume their old pep and enthusiasm for exercising as soon as they are equipped with their new feathers.

Do not become lax in your feeding habits during the moulting period or immediately after it. Continue to feed good, sound grain and remember that it is just as easy to throw them off form by overfeeding during this period as it is during the actual racing season.

As far as possible prevent the males from fighting while they are developing their new feathers. If necessary close up any nest boxes over which the struggle breaks out.

If the fancier's hands are inclined to perspire heavily, he should handle his birds as little as possible during the moulting season.

FRET-MARKS—Fret-marks of feathers on the wing are characterized by disintegration of the upper-feather structure, which can be brought about by a number of causes, namely: Undernourishment of the feather through run down condition of the bird, long exposure to weather conditions while the bird was lost for several days or even weeks, trying to find its way home, encountering wires while in flight or in the case of young birds exposure to cold weather conditions while still in the nest before sufficient protective coat of feathers had developed. Whatever the cause the bird is usually of little or no value for further races that season, and if the condition is still pronounced after completion of the moulting season, it should be killed. In 95 per cent of the cases, the fret marks will not reappear in the next feathers. Such birds may be used for breeding purposes the next season, unless you suspect the trouble may be due to heredity, and many of them will return to good form as racers in the coming summer.

FEATHER ROT—Closely allied to fret-marks is the feather rot menace. It is caused by a tiny mite which burrows into the feather follicles, causing the feathers to fall out and assume a tattered appearance or baldness in places. Old birds, thus afflicted, frequently pass the trouble onto the youngsters. The best program to stamp out the disease before it obtains a foothold in the loft is to kill or isolate all affected birds. If a particularly valuable bird is stricken and the fancier hates to lose him, a cure can be attempted by lighly applying iodine or sulphur ointment to the affected parts. Pull out as many feathers as necessary to give a smooth surface and allow the iodine or ointment to penetrate. If iodine is used, apply every third day, and if the ointment is employed, apply once daily until improvement is noted.

CLIPPED WINGS—Pigeons whose wings have been clipped are usually of little value as racers again after their wing flights moult out. Exceptions may be found to this rule, however, and I personally know of few birds, whose wings were clipped which came back the next year and turned in creditable performances. Most birds which have been subjected to this treatment will be found to have suffered too much from the long inactivity of their wings. The long idleness produces a general weakened condition, the bird's vitality is sapped and its endurance is gone, an almost insurmountable state of condition if the fancier tries to get his bird into winning form.

SPLIT FLIGHTS—Split flights, or cloven feathers, are rare ailments which attack the larger feathers as the result of a blood deficiency, a condition something akin to anemia. The splits appear about an inch from the wing and extend about one-quarter to three-quarters of an inch, accompanied by a discoloration of the quill and deterioration of feathers. When symptoms of this trouble appear the fancier should immediately start adding sulphur to the feed (see sulphur instructions in Diseases chapter) and revise the diet to provide a greater protein content. As soon as the blood is purified and the diet righted energy will flow into the feathers and with the new moult the flights will be restored to normal. Valuable racing birds, which go decidedly off form in one season will often be found to be suffering of this complaint while apparently otherwise in good heath. If the next moult shows an improvement they will usually regain their speed unless other complications develop in their condition. If the trouble is suspected as heredity the bird should be eliminated as a breeder and eventually disposed of when its usefulness as a racer wanes.

PROGRESS OF THE MOULT—After the bird drops its first primary wing flight the moult is considered as formally under way, although it does not reach its height until the months of August and September. As soon as the first new flight is developed the second feather will drop and so on. Some birds moult faster than others and in some cases they will often "throw" two feathers within a few days, placing them under a terrific handicap if they are scheduled for races. Thus it is the fancier's problem to defer this moult as long as possible and hold this gap in the bird's wing as close to the first flight as possible. Old birds racing in late summer must necessarily be allowed to have a youngster in nest to check the moult temporarily as much as possible. After the dropping of the flights reaches the fourth or fifth feather, the smaller feathers on the wing start to drop and later the moulting spreads throughout the bird. Once the smaller feathers start to drop out the bird is practically through with the racing for the entire season.

THE TAIL—Many fanciers are inclined to overlook the tail of the racing homer when preparing their birds for the races or the show pen. A bird considered as being in "good feather condition" for those long distance races or capable of copping a top ranking show prize must have at least 10 feathers and preferable its physical allotment of 12. The tail of the racing homer in flight is more important than the average fancier realizes and it is as vital as the rudder of a ship or tail of an airplane. If the bird is sent away to the race with only six or eight or even as few as four feathers in its tail, an extra strain is thrown upon the wings, usually with disastrous results. Birds thus handicapped cannot produce their best efforts. They seldom win unless under "smash" conditions when the average speed hits a low mark.

CHAPTER VI

YOUNG BIRD RACING

MOST INTERESTING PHASE OF SPORT — For sheer excitement there is nothing that will match young bird racing, especially the flights over the shorter distances from 50 to 150 miles in which thousands of birds are involved and the first returns to the many competing lofts zoom into sight in small flocks of 5 to 25. First and second place diplomas on the 500, 600 and 1,000-mile races may provide greater satisfaction for retrospect in future years but there is no greater thrill than seeing five or more birds drop on your trap simultaneously, sending you into ecstatic frenzy attempting to clock them with a minimum amount of delay. Long distance racing on the other hand requires hours of patient waiting which may often extend into days of delay and the returns are usually widely scattered.

In my opinion, young bird races are at least half the sport, owing to the heavy entry list and their universal appeal. All of the fanciers in the club, from the rankest novice to the oldest veteran are placed on the same basis, and a newcomer may pull down the grand prize as well as the old-timer. In old bird races, fanciers, who do not have seasoned and experienced racers, are given less than an outside chance of winning any of the awards.

Some of the old-time fanciers are inclined to scoff at the young bird races and discredit young recruits' winnings in this branch of the sport, but the fact in the matter is they do not care to take the time nor patience for thoroughness of training which is demanded of a young bird winner. Fanciers, who devote plenty of time to their young birds, giving them plenty of road work and regularly exercising them twice daily will reap big rewards in this department.

Young bird racing is overdone in many centers although it is not so much the fault of the clubs' 300 and 500-mile schedule as it is the individual fanciers. The wisest fanciers will keep about half of their birds at home after reaching the 150-mile mark, assuring themselves of yearlings the next year. Those who persist in sending their birds to every station on the schedule do so at the risk of having their entire young bird team cleaned out in a series of smashes.

In the final analysis, the actual distance to be flown by the young birds depends entirely on the course your club follows. Climatic conditions, tendencies to foggy, rainy or cold weather, rivers, valleys, seashore, mountains and the general terrain, sealevel, etc., are the dominating factors in getting the birds home. In some parts of the country the clubs do not have any trouble getting their birds up to 300 miles as young birds, whereas other sections have difficulty, with the same stock, of flying beyond 150 miles.

MINIMUM TRAINING LOSSES—Those who do not have the means and time to put their youngsters through a rigid training program should at least give their young bird teams tosses of 1, 5, 10, 15 and 30 miles as the absolute minimum, in all fairness to the birds. These distances represent cutting the training flights as far as any fancier would dare. Any further reductions might prove to be suicide for the young bird team. The curtailed program mentioned above might provide the birds with all the training they need but much depends on weather conditions. If the racing days are blessed with an abundance of sunshine and good visibility, etc., the youngsters with little training might do as well as birds which were put through an intensive training routine. On the other hand if hard races result with strong headwinds and low visibility, the youngsters which had the most experience on the road, will forge to the front. There is also much variation between entire lofts of young birds. If they are full of pep, spending a good share of the time flying about the neighborhood, ready to zoom into the air again at the slightest disturbing sound or sight, it seems they need comparatively little training. But if they have to be forced into exercising it is much better to give them plenty of work down the road, developing their endurance and muscles and working off any excess fat.

BUNCHING UP ON SINGLE TOSSES—Several fanciers have written in to the writer to the effect that their youngsters, when subjected to the single toss system, and spaced two to three minutes apart will often come home in twos and threes and occasionally four and five in a bunch. There is no alarm for this occurrence and it is expected occasionally when we consider that some birds, most usually the poorer ones, are slow to get their bearings and as they wander about the countryside they will quickly join any pigeon which comes into their range of vision. This is merely the bird's instinct of gregariousness asserting itself. The tendency to flock together is stronger in pigeons than any other form of bird life. The homers will often join up with even a common pigeon, merely for the sake of the company it seems.

TRAINING OF LATE YOUNGSTERS—By all means get the few late-bred youngsters you may keep each year, on the road for at least 25 and 30 miles in the late summer or early fall months. The homing instinct early asserts itself and it should be encouraged and developed as much as possible during the first year of the bird's life. Late youngsters, however, should be discouraged. They are of little value. They are usually too late to obtain a full moult and consequently must be held over until they are two years old before they are fit for flying. The space on the loft the first year could be used to a better advantage with youngsters or yearlings with racing possibilities.

VARIATIONS IN YOUNG BIRDS—Inevitable variations will appear in young birds and some of them will get slightly thinner than the rest as you attempt to hold down their feed rations and condition them properly. Again others appear to thrive on the limited feed and will put on more weight than the rest. These unavoidable variations are noticeable to any fancier who takes his youngsters into his hands daily during the y. b. racing season. Some birds, by their individual peculiarities will require more feed than the others and in such cases feeding should be regulated to suit the individual birds, if you have the time and patience. Give a little more grain to the birds which are inclined to get too thin and keep the heavier ones from picking up too much feed by shunting them into a box, basket or cage in the loft during part of the feeding operations. During the past season prior to this writing I had two unusually large youngsters who kept putting on excess weight while I was attempting to get the entire loft toughened up for the races. I knew they were far too heavy to expect to win with them so I penned them part of the time while I called my other birds in the loft for feed and I saw to it daily that they were fed only about two-thirds of what the others received. The two struggled at the lathe barrier behind which I had locked them in a nest box and when released they reacted like birds handled under the widowhood system. Both birds won more than their share of prize money and one of them was one of the three most consistent members of the young bird team. Handling of birds in the manner described above might sound like a tremendous amount of extra work to some fanciers but young bird racing requires more time, diligent study, careful attention to details and precision in your program. Young birds are highly temperamental and more responsive to changes in diet as well as more easily affected by disease than old birds. Thus it can be seen the fancier should put more time in his loft during the young bird season rather than take an opportunity to let down as many do.

FLYING MATED YOUNGSTERS—It is unfortunate when members of the young bird racing team mate and go to nest but allow them to follow their own inclinations. As soon as they start building a nest, slip a couple of spoiled or dummy eggs into the bowl and save the young hen from egg-laying strain, if possible. This maneuver will usually check the progress of the egg-developing processes and spare the female from being subjected to such a strain so early in her life. No other harm will result from the nesting unless the hens are allowed to lay and the pair are permitted to rear youngsters.

MIDWEEK TOSSES — The perennial problem of whether your young bird racing team should be given midweek tosses of 20 to 30 miles depends solely on whether they are taking regular exercises around the loft. If the young birds will spend a half an hour or more in the air during the morning liberation and a similar period in the afternoon without being forced into it, I would say that they do not need any mid-week tosses. Frequently, however, a fancier's young bird team will show a decided reluctance to such exercising for one cause or another and will attempt to pitch back on the loft within a short time after liberation. It is hard to explain such sluggish performances, which are often nothing more than habit, when the birds appear otherwise fit and healthy. Needless to say, it is impossible to keep the birds in proper shape for the weekly races in such a state of affairs unless their wind and wings are developed through **wing-stretchers** down the road or through forced exercising. Mid-week tosses are also recommended for the long distance racing birds which also appear in need of more exercising than they take by their own volition. After an extremely hard race, youngsters and old birds should be allowed to rest about two days unless they persist in flying with the flock about the home loft. If they appear worn out, nothing is to be gained by requiring them to do more unnecessary work. The fancier should keep a close watch on the condition of the young bird team during the week as they are subject to quick changes and require greater attention than the hardened old birds. Over feeding will throw the youngsters off form quicker than the old birds as the latter are usually feeding their squabs during the racing season and any surplus of food made available may be passed off to the young in the nest in more generous quantities.

LENGTH OF EXERCISING PERIODS—Old and young birds, particularly the latter must be watched carefully throughout the racing season in their exercising periods. If they take to the air frequently during the morning and afternoon free trap periods and swing about the loft as though they enjoy it, it won't be necessary to force them to exercise or clock them in actual time spent in the air. However, I would make sure that they were in the air forty to sixty minutes a day, whether you force them to take longer exercising periods or not. Under no circumstances though should they be made to fly longer than one hour, counting a half hour in the morning and another half hour after four p. m.

The racing team can be forced to exercise longer by clapping the hands or emitting a loud sharp whistle whenever they start setting their wings preparatory to landing. Whenever my own birds display a marked tendency to loaf, I get on the job and hold a watch on them until they get a full half hour's exercise. After a few days of this procedure the birds soon learn what is expected of them and at least they make no further attempts to land unless I go inside the loft, give them the feeding signal or get out of sight.

During the morning hours from daylight to 7 a. m. it is usually unnecessary to force exercising as the air is cooler at that time of the day and all forms of bird life enjoy being on the outside and in the air. In the afternoon, however, they often are inclined to show the effects of the heat and are sometimes hard to get under way. I always see to it that the birds stay in the air for a full half hour immediately after I open the traps at 4 p. m. After that they can follow their own inclinations on whether they want to fly longer, but in the months of August and September with the heat and moult coming on, they usually will spend quite a bit of time resting.

The routine of exercising, trapping and systematic feeding if followed with clock-like precision day after day, week after week through April to September and October, will pay you big dividends in both the old bird and the young bird races. This heavy training schedule for the old birds may begin about a month in advance of the regular races, gradually building them up to their peak of condition. For the youngsters I usually begin the heavier work about July 20th, carefully following it through to the finish. Prior to July 20th I allow the youngsters to eat their fill of good grain and from that date on I start tapering them off, gradually working off any excess fat that they have put on.

The following schedule may be followed from day to day in exercising birds:

Sunday—Race day. Lock the birds up for the rest of the day after they come home.

Monday—Open trap daylight to 7 a. m. and 4 p. m. to dusk. Absolutely no forced exercising as birds should be given a chance to recuperate fully from effects of previous day's race.

Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday—Half hour of exercise, twice a day. Open trap as indicated for Monday.

Friday—Start tapering them off. No more than 15 to 20 minutes of forced exercising. If they want to fly longer, however, let them go.

Saturday—Open trap from daylight to 7 a. m. Absolutely no forced exercising. Feed them usual amount and lock them up for the rest of the day until time for shipment.

In cases where clubs fly on Saturdays, the above schedule could be used by merely advancing the dates accordingly. The above schedule may also be used for birds which are shipped away to the race two nights in advance of the liberation day.

EXCESSIVE TRAINING — While thoroughness in training and exercising has been stressed under other headings in this book, the matter of training can be carried too far. Fanciers, with unlimited time at their disposal are warned against taking the birds out every day in the week in the hopes of giving them added experience.

Three or four tosses a week after reaching the 20-mile mark are enough and if the birds are taken out any oftener than that the daily work becomes too much of a chore to them and a tendency to gradually slower results may be the eventual result.

BREAKING IN THE YOUNGSTERS IN THE BASKETS—On some of your earlier training trips with the young bird team, start breaking them in for the overnight trips by putting them into the basket the night before you send them down the road. In this way you will help to set up conditions just as the birds will find them on later race days when they are put in the baskets at the club headquarters on Friday or Saturday nights for races on Saturday mornings. Youngsters become excited on their first night or two away from the loft in strange surroundings and this factor must be overcome. They will be found to come home much faster on the shorter training flights after a night in the baskets than if you catch them the same morning in the loft and drive out with them and immediately release them a half hour or so later. The young birds start to form the habit of quick returns or lazy indifferent flying, as the case may be, very early in the training program. Be sure the basket bottoms are well covered with straw or sawdust and that the birds have plenty of room as poor conditions in this regard will nullify any benefits to be derived from an overnight stay in the baskets. Likewise little is to be gained by putting them into the baskets on extreme hot nights. If they cannot be comfortable they are better off on their perches in the loft. Young birds may also be aided by putting them into the baskets for three or four hours at a stretch two weeks or so before the training program begins. During these periods drinking troughs could be attached to the basket to get the birds accustomed to finding the water in that place. Later in the season this experience may prove valuable when they are held over at the releasing point for a day or two on account of unfavorable weather conditions.

CHAPTER VII

FEEDING

ELEMENTS OF A WINNING DIET—I have experimented for many years with various feed combinations and found very little difference in the results as long as I used five or six of the principal grains and gave the birds a well balanced diet.

I have also made a study of feed mixtures used by various successful fanciers in their respective clubs and have found a sharp variance in their pet formulas.

For all practical purposes the following mixture, subject to whatever revisions the fancier might wish to use, will meet any fancier's needs: Corn, 35 per cent; peas, 20 per cent; wheat, 15 per cent; barley, 10 per cent; vetch, 10 per cent; rice, 5 per cent; flax seed, 2½ per cent, and hemp, 2½ per cent.

This combination could be varied somewhat by substituting Argentine corn, hulled oats or kaffir corn for some of the larger items and using rape or canary seed in place of flax seed and hemp. Basic grains should form the foundation of whatever diet you arrive at and the lighter seeds or tid-bits as they are commonly called, should be positively not more than 5 per cent, all together.

On the loft of one fancier I found him feeding these feeds: Corn 50 per cent; wheat, 20 per cent; barley, 10 per cent; peas, 15 per cent, and flax seed, 5 per cent.

Another diet found which was used successfully on racing young birds contained 50 per cent of Full-of-Pep scratch feed; 45 per cent of a racing feed mixture which contained Argentine corn, Maples, vetch and kaffir corn and 5 per cent flax seed. Ordinary grades of scratch feed are entirely undesirable for racing homers but some of the higher priced and cleaner mixtures have been used with success to some extent.

Still another successful fancier swears by the following combination for young birds: Twenty per cent Argentine corn, 20 per cent peas, 30 per cent of American cracked corn, 20 per cent wheat, and 10 per cent vetch.

For good, all around feeds the writer recommends the prepared racing pigeon mixtures which have many followers although they are supplemented by some fanciers with cheaper grains and their individual preferences as to tidbits.

Any of the above mentioned diets may prove to be the answer to the winning combination which must be your principal goal. After once arriving at a winning feeding system, stick to it, and avoid being led this way or that by whatever feeding or tib-bit fad which may turn up from time to time. Until you have achieved success continue with your experiments and work out a feeding program best suited to your strain of birds and system of loft management.

IMPORTANCE OF INGREDIENTS — Any fancier may handle his own rations more intelligently by consulting the ingredient chart below which gives in detail the composition of the principal grains and seeds in use on racing homer lofts. If he will carefully analyze the feeds he was already using before reading this book he may find that his difficulty lies in using too many grains with a high protein content, too much carbohydrates, too much fat or not enough fibre, etc. By consulting the chart he may also determine what feeds to use during the moulting period when feeds high in protein content are recommended or during the winter season when grain with high carbohydrate and fat content are given preference.

The ingredient chart follows:

American corn—Moisture, 12.9 per cent; ash, 1.3 per cent; protein, 9.3 per cent; fibre, 1.9 per cent; carbohydrates, 70.3 per cent, and fat, 4.3 per cent.

Argentine corn—Moisture, 10.5 per cent; ash, 1.5 per cent; protein, 10.3 per cent; fibre, 2.0 per cent; carbohydrates, 71.00 per cent, and fat, 4.7 per cent.

Canada peas—Moisture, 9.2 per cent; ash, 3.4 per cent; protein, 25.2 per cent; fibre, 5.6 per cent; carbohydrates, 57.8 per cent, and fat, 1.1 per cent.

Maple peas—Moisture, 11 per cent; ash, 2.5 per cent; protein, 21.9 per cent; fibre, 5.5 per cent; carbo, 58.2 per cent; fat, 0.9 per cent.

Vetch—Moisture, 13.7 pct.; ash, 3.3 pct.; protein, 25.4 pct.; fibre, 5.8 pct.; carbo, 50.7 pct.; and fat, 1.5 pct.

Barley—Moisture, 9.6 pct.; ash, 2.9 pct.; protein, 12.8 pct.; fibre, 5.5 pct.; carbo, 66.9 pct.; and fat, 2.3 pct.

Kaffir corn—Moisture, 9.4 pct.; ash, 1.6 pct.; protein, 11.1 pct.; fibre, 2.1 pct.; carbo, 72.6 pct.; and fat, 3.2 pct.

Wheat—Moisture—10.6 pct.; ash, 1.8 pct.; protein, 12.3 pct.; fibre, 2.4 pct.; carbo, 71.1 pct.; and fat, 1.8 pct.

Canary seed—Moisture, 7.0 pct.; ash, 5.5 pct.; protein, 17.2 pct.; fibre, 5.7 pct.; carbo, 59.1 pct.; and fat, 5.5 pct.

Flax—Moisture, 9.2 pct.; ash, 4.3 pct.; protein, 22.6 pct.; fibre, 7.1 pct.; carbo, 23.2 pct.; and fat, 33.7 pct.

Hemp—Moisture, 8 pct.; ash, 2 pct.; protein, 10.0 pct.; fibre, 14.0 pct.; carbo, 45.0 pct.; fat, 21 pct.

Millet—Moisture, 9.1 pct.; ash, 3.3 pct.; protein, 11.8 pct.; fibre, 7.8 pct.; carbo, 64.7 pct.; and fat, 3.3 pct.

Oats—Moisture, 8.4 pct.; ash, 1.8 pct.; protein, 16.0 pct.; fibre, 1.5 pct.; carbo, 65.5 pct.; and fat, 6.8 pct.

Rice—Moisture, 12.9 pct.; ash, 5.4 pct.; protein, 7.4 pct.; fibre, 9.3 pct.; carbo, 64.3 pct; and fat, 2.6 pct.

GRADUAL CHANGES IN FEED—During seasonal adjustments in your feed rations, work into your new mixture in progressive stages rather than by abrupt changes. The birds will react unfavorably to radical changes in their feed. Gradual changes in the kind of feed being used will enable the pigeon's digestive system to become accustomed to the revisions without loss of weight, vitality or slumping into poor form.

HOW TO FEED MIXTURES—When feeding a mixture of grains or seeds, throw only a handful of the feed onto the floor or into the feeder at a time. If the entire quantity is dumped at once, to "get the chore off your hands as soon as possible," some birds, relishing a certain kind of seed, will pick up only one item, losing the benefit of the mixture. Tastes of the individual birds vary considerably, one will try to pick up all the hemp as long as the supply lasts, another will attempt to get a corner on the vetch, and so on. When a small quantity is put before the birds, there is a greater rush to get the limited supply, and the "specializing" birds do not have a time to ponder any selection of morsels. This again may sound like a lot of unnecessary work to some readers but it is the painstaking attention to the countless number of such details as I have enumerated in this book which will often make the difference between a successful fancier and one who is doomed everlastingly as a "donater" in the races.

FEEDING ON RETURNS FROM RACES—Do not allow the birds to eat their fill immediately after coming back from a hard race. A small quantity of grain or some tid-bit should be on hand to act as additional incentive to lure the bird into the loft, but feeding at this time can be easiy overdone. The pigeon must be compared to the human track athlete. Great distance runners, or sprinters for that matter, would not think of eating for quite some time after an exhausting race. The chief requisite immediately after a gruelling event is water and just enough food to allay pangs of hunger. Regular feeding may be resumed the same day as the race after the bird has been on the loft for two hours or so, however.

TID-BITS—Small seeds hold an important place in the diet of the successful loft but the fancier must take care not to overdo the tid-bit item. Too many small seeds and excessive quantities of any one item are worse than no seeds at all. All fanciers have their pet ideas on tid-bits—one will tell you to feed this, and another that—but it is impossible to follow all of their suggestions. Hemp and flax seed are popular tid-bit favorites and others less commonly used are canary and rape seed.

MOIST FEED OR GRIT—Feed or grit which has become dampened through exposure or absorption of moisture in rainy weather conditions may be made more wholesome by baking in the oven until they are thoroughly dry. Baking will check any tendency of the grain to become mouldy and prevent the birds from having loose bowels. New corn or wheat, which are heavy in moisture content and are not recommended for use, may be used if absolutely necessary by the same baking process.

IMPORTANCE OF GRIT—Too much emphasis cannot be placed on grit and birds which are allowed their freedom regularly need it almost as much as the prisoners. Many fanciers form the fallacy that birds which have access to good sandy, coarse soil do not need grit, pointing out the fact that their eggs are always hard-shelled. No matter how many particles of sand or minerals which they obtain in foraging in soil about the lofts or in nearby fields, the birds need still other essential elements which cannot be replaced. There are several good commercial mixtures on the market today. Your birds cannot thrive without it. Iron and phosphorous are needed to provide a tonic. Hard substances give thorough mastication, thereby permitting ease of assimilation. Grit builds tissue and enables the birds to absorb more energy from every particle of food. In short, grit has no substitute.

HOPPER-FEEDING—Hoppers are practically useless if the fancier entertains any hopes of getting his racing homers into the proper fettle of condition required to win races. The proper form of loft management requires that you do all your feeding by hand. Hopper-feeding may be adaptable to other varieties of pigeons and in squab-raising but has no place in this sport except possibly for the birds in the prisoners' pen. Hand-feeding is more desirable for a number of reasons, namely: The birds become much more tame and consequently will show more speed in trapping; if you are feeding a mixture the amount of feed may be regulated to prevent certain birds from picking up only one kind of grain and you are in a first hand position to accurately gauge the amount of feed they need.

SALT — If the grit you are using contains salt you need not have any further worries on this item. Salt holds an important place in the diet of a successfully-managed loft but yet I have found that a high percentage of fanciers are apparently unaware of its values. It may be fed in various forms—in the rock state, broken up or as loose salt. Some fanciers moisten a sack of loose salt and then bake it in the oven into brick or hardened form. In this form the salt may be set before the birds in the lump state or allowed to remain in the bag and the birds will peck at it through the cloth. Salt should be kept in the loft, in some sort of box or feeder where it cannot be contaminated, and not thrown on the ground in the prisoners' pen or around the loft. When exposed to the elements, the salt will be worked into the surrounding soil by rain and when the rock is finally dissolved entirely the birds are apt to eat the salt-flavored earth if the supply is not immediately replenished.

WATERING AFTER THE RACES—The water supply should also be taken into account for birds just returning from the races. Although it is essential that a fresh supply should be on hand, the water should be of average temperature or lukewarm rather than ice cold. Cold water might chill the birds' digestive systems while their bodies are still warm from the effects of the race and upset the functions of the organs. Diarrhea might easily result from this source. Some of the English fanciers give their birds milk instead of water immediately after they come in from the races, their theory being that the birds need a good nourishing drink after an exhausting race rather than hard grain or plain water. Difficulty is encountered in attempting to teach birds to drink milk and they have to be driven to the point of hunger and extreme thirst before they will taste it for the first time.

CHAPTER VIII

DISEASE CONTROL AND TONICS

ISOLATE DISEASED BIRDS—While hundreds of remedies have been concocted for the treatment of many diseases and physical complaints which assail racing homers, isolation in a small, dry pen away from the regular loft will work wonders in bringing about permanent cures in a high percentage of cases. Isolation is recommended for two reasons, the bird will not act as carrier and spread the disease to others on the loft, and it will obtain rest and be spared from attack or being pushed about. While the bird is being held in his "temporary hospital," it can be treated properly. Ailing birds should not be given more than a week to respond to treatment and rest. If they continue to go light, display little appetite for food or are unable to digest that which they pick up, they should be killed.

SUDDEN DEATH—Sudden death of racing homers, in which birds, apparently healthy one day are found dead the next, usually results from poison, picked up in the fields or fatty degeneration of the muscular tissues. Birds weakened by excessive breeding, too much egg strain and burning out on the road are subject to the latter symptoms but such deaths are rare. All birds which die should be dissected to learn the probable cause of death, unless the contributory cause was a known fact.

SKIN ERUPTIONS—Don't be alarmed at small pimple-like eruptions or tiny wart-like growths which appear during the moulting season. This is a trouble associated with the weakness of the moulting period and will usually disappear without any remedial measures as soon as the bird gets its new feathers. The eruptions also occasionally appear if the blood becomes too rich. Changes in the feed content and use of epsom salts or sulphur will help to clarify the condition.

USE OF SULPHUR—Sulphur is a good remedy for a generally run-down loft, in which birds are suffering sluggishness, and poorly regulated bowel movements, but it must be used discriminately. It is easily supplied to the birds and should be mixed with the feed rather than the water. Directions for using are as follows: Put the amount of feed you ordinarily give your birds at one time into a pan, add one teaspoon of sulphur, enough for forty birds, moisten the mixture with few drops of water, stir it thoroughly and then feed immediately to the birds. Care should be taken to use as little water as possible. A few drops will provide enough moisture to make the sulphur stick to the grain. The birds will eye the grain with a distrustful look the first time you offer the sulphur-coated feed but if they are hungry enough they will eat it with little hesitation. Watch the droppings for a few days after administering the sulphur and you will note quite a contrast almost over night. Sulphur is a great bood-purifier as well as bowel-regulator, but should not be fed except when you deem the condition of the birds warrants it. Good healthy birds do not need to be pampered with and medicinal measures should not be resorted to unless actually necessary.

THE USE OF TONICS—Attention to the many details already mentioned in this book will go a long way to building up each bird's constitution to a point where it is capable of withstanding disease in any form. However, there are times when, in spite of all the precautions we may take and of our careful attention, the birds may appear slightly off form, although not exactly sick. In such cases mild tonics as sulphur, powdered sulphate iron, iron and quinine pills, cod liver oil or hemp seed will usually swing them back into good shape in a short time. Hemp is the greatest of all revivers if the flock appears in need of a quick-acting tonic. Hemp and flax seed, fed in small quantities will go a long way to get the birds into shape and keep them that way. A handful of such a mixture twice a day for a flock of forty birds will suffice. A dose of Epsom salts will also work wonders in stubborn cases of sluggishness.

WATER SUPPLY—Great variations will be found between the water of various cities within a small area, some drawing their supply from the rivers and others from the artesian wells. In some cities the water is heavily-laden with chemicals to check the contamination and birds may react to this factor. If your water supply is suspected as being at fault, boil all water before putting it into the containers.

GREASY WATTLES AND EYE COLDS—These symptoms are unmistakable signs of colds and accompany damp or poorly-ventilated loft conditions. A number of remedies are very effective but the contributory causes must be removed before a permanent cure can be effected. Dissolve a small quantity of salt, preferably common table salt, in warm water and brush the solution into the upper part of the bird's mouth. Repeat this treatment for several days unless improvement is noted. If the trouble is accompanied with throat congestion swab the throat as well. Another effective remedy, commonly used, is turpentine, rubbed about the wattles and swabbed in the throat. Build up the bird's vitality and resistance to disease by use of cod liver oil, applied through the feed or with a medicine dropper.

TUMORS—Fleshy tumors or wart-like growths which occasionally develop for no apparent reason on otherwise perfectly healthy birds can be cured without resorting to the knife in many cases. If the growth has attained sufficient size tie a silk thread about the base and draw tightly. Apply iodine daily to the growth, which will gradually dry up and drop off without loss of blood or pain to the bird.

CROP GAS—When the crop of squabs or young pigeons fills with gas from sour food, puncture the crop with a needle to permit the gas to escape and dress the wound with iodine. Give the bird warm milk through a medicine dropper and if improvement is not observed in a day or so, wash out the crop with an antiseptic.

CONTROL OF LICE AND OTHER PARASITES—Insect complaints reach their height every year during the warmest months when they multiply at an alarming rate, once they gain a foothold in the loft. If the pests have invaded your loft you must necessarily increase your vigilence and step up ordinary methods of exterminating them. First of all, the loft must be thoroughly whitewashed and regularly cleaned during the spring or fall months. Tobacco stems or pine needles should be constantly provided for nesting material and sawdust should be treated with carbolic acid if it is used as a base for nests. Any reliable insect powder, thoroughly dusted into the feathers of the birds, is helpful but the procedure must be repeated frequently as the powder gradually shakes free when the birds fly about or bathe. Liquid disinfectants such as oil of sassafras or commercial mixtures, sold by pigeon supply dealers or drug stores are more lasting but should be applied in very small quantities. Moisten a finger tip or cork with the fluid and apply gently to the feathers under the wings and the tail. Care should be taken that the fluids do not come in contact with the skin. The odor from the solution will spread throughout the bird's feathers and the insects will be seen to beat a hasty retreat as the fumes reach them.

During the racing season it is a good plan to dust the birds lightly with lice powder or apply a small quantity of insecticide as described above just before the birds are taken away to the club headquarters. When the birds are put into the baskets they often come in contact with poorly-handled and lice-infected birds through which they may become contaminated.

Young birds are apparently more vulnerable to lice than the hardened old birds and they will require more attention in keeping them free from vermin.

DIARRHEA—Loose bowels often result from a combination of unfavorable circumstances such as poor ventilation, too much salt, corn which was not properly dried, mouldy grain, a contaminated loft or poor grit. Correction of any of these faults which may be responsible will clear up the trouble with little difficulty. Birds, suffering of severe cases of this complaint may be relieved by putting them on a strict rice diet.

CHAPTER IX

GENERAL LOFT MANAGEMENT

WHITEWASHING THE LOFT—Whitewashing of the loft is recommended every fall, immediately after the completion of the young bird races or in advance of breeding season in late winter. Several formulae of whitewash mixtures are used. One of the commonest is slaked lime, water and salt. Another stipulates the use of buttermilk in place of the water. The best whitewash formula for new lumber, however, is the government-prescribed mixture, which will stick well to smooth boards or lumber, which has not previously been used. It follows: "Slake one-half bushel of lime with water. The usual way to do this is to put the lime in a wooden box or barrel, adding water a little at a time, and stirring until it is thoroughly slaked. During the process of slaking, the mixture will boil and continue boiling until the slaking process is completed. Make sure that you do not add too much water at a time since it will "drown" the lime and interfere with slaking. To this slaked lime add one peck of salt dissolved in warm water, three pounds of ground rice boiled in water to thin paste, one-half pound of powdered Spanish whiting and a pound of clear glue dissolved in warm water. Mix well and allow to stand for several days. Thin with water to the desired consistency and apply with a brush."

SENTIMENT—Sentiment has no place in the racing homer sport. When a championship bird of other years has outlived his usefulness as both a racer and breeder they should be disposed of. If the personal attachment you have formed for this particular bird through its long faithful service, does not permit you to kill him, let some-one else do the job or at least retire him and get him off the loft. Old birds, which are plainly showing their advanced age, will prove a great handicap in trying to exercise your entire loft properly. They no longer swing into the air with the proper amount of enthusiasm and after a few turns about the neighborhood are ready to pitch back into the loft, oftimes dragging the rest of the flock down with them.

DANGERS OF BIRD FIGHTING—What may look to the fancier to be a harmless fight over a nest between two vigorous males may often have dire consequences. It may seem amusing to the spectator but such scraps are often responsible for the numerous broken flights from time to time which shelve good racers or throw them off stride. If a yearling male takes a sound beating from an older cock it may upset his entire disposition and cause him to adopt a cowardly manner, fleeing for his life every time another male makes a gesture toward him. Disputed empty nest boxes should be closed up whenever possible to end such feuds before either one or both of the birds breaks off feathers against the boxes while attempting to club each other into submission with their wings. In addition to the danger of broken flights, there is danger to the bird's eye and risk of causing infection in the eye cere. Much of the fighting around the loft, however, cannot be averted and the ordinary skirmishes on the floor, in which little damage is done, merely add to the hustle and bustle in the loft which is humming with activity. It is the long, drawn-out battles for permanent possession of a box or two which do the damage.

Fanciers should watch their birds for these occasional outbreaks as the jealousy instinct, stirred by these fights, will usually key up the males for important races. If the fight starts a day or so before the shipping day, pen one of the males up until shortly before the basketing time. Then allow him his liberty and permit the rivals to clash for a few seconds before transferring them to the basket.

EGGS RUINED BY DISINFECTANTS—It is an unwise policy to pour strong disinfectants or anti-lice mixtures into the bottom of the nest bowl. Such fluids are apt to be entirely too strong and failure of the eggs to hatch may result. The eggs are very porous and the germ in them may easily be destroyed in this manner. Tobacco stems or pine needles make the most effective and harmless nesting materials. The odor works into the feathers of the sitting birds without endangering the eggs. While the birds are sitting anti-lice powder can be administered very effectively by lifting each wing and dusting in a quantity or shooting direct from the box in the manner a commonly-used fly powder is used.

HANDLING THE NEST BOWLS—After the youngster has attained sufficient size and leaves the nest submerge the nest bowl in water for a day or so before attempting to put it back into use again. The water will loosen up the nesting material and accumulation which often sticks like glue and becomes a source of contamination if not removed properly. Before putting the nest bowls back on the loft give them a good scrubbing with a mild disinfectant.

KEYING UP HENS—Hens may often be keyed up into winning form by inserting a four or five-day-old youngster under them after they have been sitting anywhere from three days to hatching time. The youngster should be placed under them and the eggs removed about a half an hour before the hen is put into the basket.

DRINKING FOUNTAIN MANEUVER — In order to make sure that every bird will take a drink at the latest possible moment before shipment the drinking fountain should be removed from the loft three or four hours before the final half hour. As soon as it is returned, the birds will crowd around the fountain and all will take a drink. Otherwise some birds may take their last drink two hours before they are basketed and will have that much more thirst than many of their competitors in the race.

Take special care of late arriving pigeons, especially those which have been out on the road for a week or two as the result of storms and being blown off course. There is a danger of such half-starved birds immediately over-eating too much so feed them sparingly. Ground-up feed is better for them than large whole coarse feed for a few days.

As additional reference material we recommend the two great American magazines devoted to the sport of pigeons, namely the American Pigeon Journal and the American Racing Pigeon News. Two booklets on racing pigeons, which we also recommend, are "Young Bird Racing" and "Lofts for Racing Pigeons", both written by Charles Heitzman.

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